

Master Yin Guang's Letter Revealing the Profound and Esoteric Meaning Behind Life Release.



Master Yin Guang (1861-1940)

Translation of Letter Encouraging Support for the Rebuilding of the Life Release Pond of Nanxun Ultimate Bliss Temple (from the Collected Works of Master Yin Guang).

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The action of cherishing life and releasing captive animals is straightforward and easily done. However, the principles behind are profound and esoteric. If we do not understand the principles, then even though we may superficially perform the action, we will never embody the required sincerity, dedication, and compassion. Such shallow mindedness weakens our merit and prevents us from deriving the full karmic benefits of life release. Moreover, whenever ignorant people criticize or slander the practice, we may become doubtful and retreat from our initial virtuous resolve. Such is unfortunately often the case.

Thus, this essay will explore in detail the principles behind life release, to expound the Dharma that allows myriad beings to bathe in the benevolent compassion of the Buddha's wisdom and grace, and to help all persons accrue merit and good fortune. Once profound and sincere compassion dissolves everyone's evil karma of killing, we shall all enjoy a long and peaceful life. Moreover, I pray that all will dedicate their

merits towards Pure Land rebirth—transcendence beyond the triple realm of the Samsara—to become disciples of Amitabha immersed in the virtuous fellowship of the Lotus Sea Assembly.

The myriad beings of land and sea fundamentally share the same heart-nature of the Buddhas of past, present and future. There is no difference. However, as evil karma accrued in past lifetimes now shroud their innate brightness and wisdom, preventing it from shining forth, they inhabit the forms of animals today. They are thus forced into a life of ignorance, concerned only with survival and feeding themselves, unable to do anything else. They are like a bejeweled bronze mirror encased in centuries of grime and dust. Even under the bright sun, it neither appears to be valuable nor does it gleam. Only when a wise person, seeing its true value, polishes and restores it, will it once again gleam brightly. At the beginning, only the form may reveal itself, but once he polishes it to the utmost, it shines forth boundlessly once more. At this point, regular people will recognize it as treasure. We must understand that the mirror's inherent ability to gleam was not granted by the act of polishing, but without it, it would never have shined again. The inherent natures of sentient beings of the Samsara, from the human to the heavenly, are thus similar. As their innate brightness remains shrouded by past evil karma, ignorance of their own true natures perpetuates their existence within the Samsara.

Shakyamuni Buddha understood that the innate natures of all sentient beings did not differ from that of the Buddhas, and so spoke the Dharma in accordance with the differing inclinations of various sentient beings. He helped all to cultivate the Dharma of Sila, Samadhi and Prajna, allowing them to eventually cease delusion and rediscover their innate blessings and perfect wisdom, and attain the true Dharma-body. He also caused the people of the world to take up the vows of mercy and compassion, to cease killing, and liberate life.

This is because we and all other sentient beings have cycled within the Samsara since time immemorial, alternatively begetting and killing each other. Thus, we have all at one point been their fathers, brothers, sisters, sons and daughters. And they too have been our fathers, siblings, and children. Due to their evil karma, they have been killed by us in the past, whether as humans or animals. And due to our own evil karma, we have been, whether we were human or animal, killed by them in the past as well. For eons, we have slaughtered each other without end. Common people are ignorant of this fact, but the Buddhas see it clearly. Once we understand, we would be ashamed!

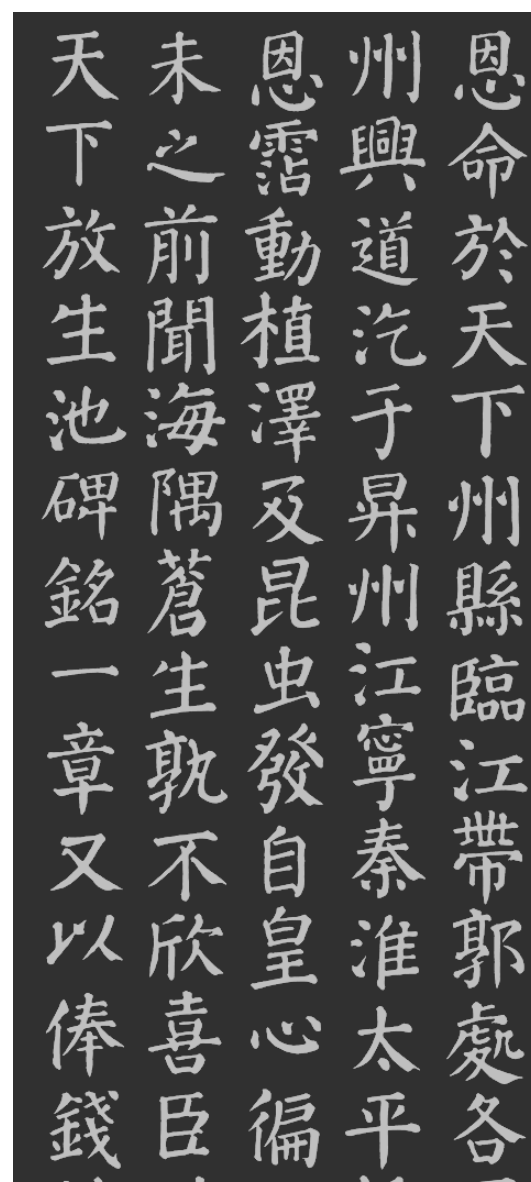
Fortunately, our past life good karmas have granted us human rebirth today. With this advantage, we ought to dissolve grievances, abstain from killing, and release life. To let all beings thrive in their respective habitats. Furthermore, we ought to recite the name of Amitabha for their benefit, to help them transcend the suffering of the Samsara. Even though their heavy evil karma prevents them from quickly attaining

Pure Land rebirth, we ourselves ought to resolve to attain Pure Land rebirth during our final moments, and rely on our merits and works of mercy to realize this goal. Once we are reborn there, we transcend the Samsara and ascend into the ranks of Sages—becoming Buddhas.

Moreover, the ancient Sages have all cherished life and liberated animals. For instance, according to the Instructions of Yi in the Book of Documents, “The birds, beasts, fish and shellfish have their own natures, let them thrive in their own environments.” King Wen of Zhou even pitied the decaying bones left unburied, not to mention living beings that can feel. Besides, the Sagely and Wise are all of one merciful heart, as seen in the examples of Jian Zi releasing captive doves, Zi Chan releasing fish into a pond, Sui Hou saving snakes, and Yang Bao saving sparrows. They all knew that sentient beings have the same Buddha-nature as humans. Even though today they are temporarily cycling within the Samsara as our friends or foes, tomorrow they shall become Buddhas. When the Buddha-dharma arrived in the East, the principles of karma, and the fact that all beings are equal and share the Buddha-nature, were finally understood by the wider public. Therefore, the Great Sages and Wise Men are united behind the virtue of cherishing life and liberating animals, for the sake of preventing wars and massacres, creating merits and blessings, and to put an end to violence so that all may enjoy their natural lifespans.

The Ancients say that, “If you wish to know the cause of wars and conflict, simply listen to the midnight cries of animals in the slaughterhouse.” They also say that, “World peace can only be achieved if all persons abstain from eating meat.” Thus, we must understand that liberating life and not killing is the ultimate solution to save the world, for it eliminates the root causes of war.

Therefore, the Great Dharma Master Zhi Zhe of the Chen dynasty purchased sixty locations along the Liang River, spanning across four hundred li, to be used as life release ponds. He then convinced the Emperor to issue an edict prohibiting poaching at these locations, and karmic retribution often fell upon those who dared to violate. Up until the Zhenguan years of the Tang dynasty, it remained so. During the second year of the Qian Yuan era of the reign of Emperor Suzong of Tang, he issued an edict ordering all the provinces to build life release ponds, and appointed famed calligrapher Yan Zhenqing to write the steles.



One of the steles based on calligraphy of Yan Zhenqing

Moreover, Yan Zhenqing also said, “My Emperor has turned all under heaven into a pond of mercy, to let myriad animals benefit from the blessings of the Dharma, and through the power of the sacred mantras, transcend this sea of Samsaric suffering.”

If we examine dynastic history, we could see another dynasty that matches the above virtue. In the first year of the Tianxi era of the reign of Emperor Zhenzong of Song, he ordered the entire realm to construct life release ponds. The famous West Lake of Hangzhou was also converted into one of the life release ponds. Additionally, the Great Dharma Master Lian Chi of the Ming dynasty constructed two life release ponds in Tuzhu and Changshou. His essay on cherishing life and liberating animals has circulated across the world. Over the last three hundred years, his virtues remain greatly admired, and countless people have been brought upon the path of mercy by his teachings.

There are some who say that the poor, widowed and suffering of this world must be helped first, and not animals. However, I say they are ignorant of the reason the Buddha exhorts all to cherish life and save animals. Even though animals and humans differ in form, the Buddha-nature is the same. They are animals because of negative karma, and we are humans because of positive karma. If we do not now show pity and compassion, and instead indulge our appetite, then once our good fortune is exhausted, and their retributions have ended, the places will switch and we would be forced to repay them with our own flesh. All strife and conflict are the result of past killing karma. If we are without killing karma, then even if we meet bandits, they would be kindly disposed towards us, and not harm us. The same goes for plagues, floods, fires, disasters and accidents. Those who cherish life and free animals rarely meet such misfortunes. To protect life is to protect ourselves, and by abstaining from killing, we will never be killed by heaven, ghosts, bandits or blood feuds.

Of course, we must save the poor, widowed, orphaned and needy whenever we can, and those who release and cherish life often give alms generously. However, as pitiable as the poor and suffering are, they are not on the verge of slaughter. On the other hand, if animals are not saved, they would be immediately killed and eaten.

Furthermore, others may question how we could save all the countless animals that exist. I say that as the purpose of life release is chiefly to encourage all to give rise to the great and merciful resolve to save animals, so that all may have hearts of great compassion and refrain from eating meat, then once the demand for meat is gone, activities such as fishing would stop as well. When this is the case, all that which flies, trots and swims will be able to live freely in their respective habitats, and the whole world is transformed into a life release sanctuary.

While not everyone will do so, even if just one person cherishes life enough to abstain from meat, then countless animals of both land and sea will be freed from slaughter, not to mention there are many who do abstain. Thus, in order to help people of the present and future neutralize the karmic causes of being widowed, orphaned, impoverished, and afflicted, to help them attain health, long life, nobility, prosperity, peace and happiness, to ensure love between father and son, and allow couples to grow old together, we must cherish life and release animals. All who do so will enjoy for the rest of their lives, and in all the lives to come, freedom from the aforementioned misfortunes, and also enjoy the blessings of long life and prosperity. This is to cover the nation with blessings. Thus, by saving animals we save humanity as well.

Outside of Nanxun Ultimate Bliss Temple, there is a life release pond. As parts of the sides have not been properly built, it has partially collapsed, and over the years, the pond itself has silted up. Thus, whenever good people release life, they do so in a small nearby river. Even though they seek to do good, the animals hardly benefit, and more than half of the animals released in the morning are recaptured by evening. If we are near a great river, then we should release there, but small rivers are unsuitable. Dharma Master Yuan Lin cannot bear to watch this happen any longer, and so he has resolved to dredge the pond and build up a secure and solid perimeter. To create a safe sanctuary for all to release life into. This is a most wonderful initiative. They have not yet begun construction. Luckily, Senior Dharma Master Jiao San of Putuo Mountain recently dropped by for a visit, and they both shared the same vision. Dharma Master Yuan Lin has since entrusted Master Jiao San with the running of the temple so he himself may let go and focus on attaining Pure Land rebirth. Master Jiao San, having taken on this duty, wishes to quickly accomplish the restoration. However, as the project is hard and costly, his own resources are insufficient. And so he intends to raise money and support from the faithful of the town. He has also asked me to write the introduction.

As I am saddened by the wars and violence of our current era, I always yearned to help, but had not the opportunity to do so until now. His request has moved my heart, and so I have discussed herein the shared innate nature between humans and animals, the principles of karma, and the consequences of killing. I hope all the donors will unite behind the vow of kindness, and donate generously to ensure that this virtuous project can be completed as soon as possible. So that countless animals may finally receive sanctuary. The merits and karmic benefits will be boundless and unlimited, able to melt away myriad disasters as towering as a mountain of ice, and gather together the clouds of auspiciousness. Lastly, the beings who will repay the kindness in the future will number in the thousands of billions.